

## Cat Mythology Cats as Familiars

Cats as familiars have a long and dark history in western mythology. These cats often found their way into literature. One of the most famous was Grimalkin, the witches' cat from Shakespeare's MacBeth. Cats as witch's companions are still a part of the popular symbology associated with the modern holiday of Halloween.

What is a familiar? In western mythology a familiar was an animal companion given by the devil to a witch in order to help her with her evil magic. These familiars would have names just like any other pet. In the middle ages, if you were caught talking to your pet (like a lot of people do) you were considered to be consorting with the devil in speaking to w obviously your familiar. The Middle Ages were a very dark and violent period in Europe. Their alternative name "Dark Ages" should come as no surprise. Learning was confined to clergy and nobility. The general population was therefore quite ignorant and prone to superstition.

A familiar could be any type of animal such as a toad, dog or cat. Black cats became the traditionally cited companion and hence cats became particularly reviled. In 1233 Pope Gregory IX wrote in his Papal Bull "Vox in Rama" actually denounced black cats as satanic. The Popes' proclamation began the persecution of cats all over Europe. Thousands and thousands of cats were burned alive in the attempt to drive out the evil Satan. Wild tales of these cats shape shifting into other creatures were common among the populace and justified these terrible acts in their minds. When the power of the Knights Templar was broken, some of the knights were said to have confessed to worshipping cats. As these so-called confessions were given under extreme torture, they

would seem to speak more to the attitudes of their inquisitors than to anything the Templars themselves had actually done.

Why were black cats in particular singled out? There are a couple of legends that might explain this singular revulsion. In the first legend, so the story goes, is that cats who were born at the end of blackberry season were called blackberry cats. According to this legend, the end of blackberry season coincides with the expulsion of Satan from heaven. When he fell he landed on a blackberry bush which he defiled with his urine and spit. Thus, blackberry cats, especially black ones are associated with the devil in this tale. The second tale comes from Italy. The Italian witches, called streghe, tell a legend about Diana who is goddess of the moon and also called "Queen of the Witches". Her brother who was known in ancient times as Apollo, is renamed Lucifer (Light Bearer) in this tale. Supposedly, Diana wanted to have a son by Lucifer, so she attempted to trick him by taking the shape of a black cat.

As you can see, these stories were pretty wild, and yet the people of those dark times took them as the gospel truth. The irony of this superstitious hysteria against cats was that by destroying the cats the Europeans nearly destroyed themselves. Cats had been used for centuries to keep down the population of vermin, especially mice and rats. When their predators were destroyed, the vermin population exploded. They ate large amounts of grain that had been meant for human consumption resulting in widespread hunger among the people. Even worse than the hunger was that the enormous numbers of rats became disease carriers. The worst of these diseases was the bubonic plague, otherwise known as the Black Death. The Plagues of the Middle Ages are terrible instance

of the  
repercussions that can befall humans due to misplaced zeal.